



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Task Force ODIN Public Affairs

Alaska Army National Guardsmen provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance over the skies of Afghanistan

PARWAN PROVINCE, Afghanistan – High above the ground, in the clear blue skies of eastern Afghanistan, Staff Sgt. Eric Maschmeier, an Alaska Army National Guardsman from Anchorage, Alaska, moves his full-motion video sensor onto a compound coalition forces are surrounding.

The radio crackles in his headset – the ground force commander is giving the green light to enter the objective and seek out an insurgent long sought-after in this province.

Maschmeier has been able to provide the commander with detailed intelligence about the compound prior to the unit's arrival, thus allowing the unit to have up-to-date information about the situation on the ground.

Maschmeier is among 20 aerial sensor operators (ASO) currently deployed with Company B, 306th Aerial Exploitation Battalion, Task Force Observe, Detect, Identify, and Neutralize - Afghanistan. Together with the 30 pilots who fly and ensure the safety of the crew and the modified King Air 300 platform, these Soldiers make up the only Army National Guard company within the battalion.

According to the Task Force Commander, Lt. Col. Paul Rogers, ODIN-A is the largest single aerial Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance unit ever deployed.

Represented by 11 state flight detachments, the Soldiers of the company have a vast pool of experience. There are 10 Soldiers deployed from Detachment 54, Alaska Army National Guard.

Flying more than 100 combat flight hours a month in Afghanistan, the Soldiers of the company become subject-matter experts on their respective duties.

"These are the best of the best Soldiers at the top of their game, I affectionately refer to our aircrew as 'Jedi Knights' because of the combined one hundred and thirty thousand flight hours of experience our pilots brought with them to this deployment," said Maj. Jerry Brennan, company B commander, 306th Aerial Exploitation Battalion, TF ODIN-A.

Pilots of the commercially-available and heavily-modified aircraft have a unique mission set here. On-board enlisted Soldiers operating collection equipment give them appropriate altitudes vector them in to position.

This represents a shift from standard Army aviation missions where pilots are flying the aircraft and the enlisted personnel are supporting the crew through maintenance and load support.

"Our sensor operators have really stepped up to the responsibility of being part of the crew," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Steve Henslee, a King Air 300 pilot and resident of Anchorage, Alaska, Detachment 54, Alaska Army National Guard. "Coordination between pilots and operators when arriving on station and maneuvering over very difficult terrain is essential. These Soldiers meet the task every day."

The sensor operators onboard the King Air 300 not only operate the various collection equipment, often times in stressful situations, but also serve as a conduit for information flow. Throughout many missions the aerial sensor operator in the back of the aircraft can be called upon to relay information to ground commanders, Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTAC), or other aircraft.

"As an ASO, we have a very big responsibility to the supported units to provide relevant timely information," Maschmeier said. "That can be stressful when Soldiers are taking fire, but the relief we hear from the Soldiers on the ground when we are able to call out things they cannot see makes all the stress bearable."

Capitalizing on the crews combined knowledge; the pilots safely maneuver and position the aircraft within heavily-crowded airspace. Many times on missions there may be numerous aircraft operating above the same point all within hundreds of feet of each other, called "the stack."

Pilots and ASOs are both trained in airspace de-confliction and management to ensure safe practices while working in such close proximity. Working with the JTACs from various services and support elements positioned around the country, crews ensure the objective area is covered with the appropriate sensor and the information collected is processed and disseminated in a timely manner.

Maschmeier pushes his video feed to the ground commander who sees the very same information that the ASO in the plane can see. While ground units converge on the compound, Maschmeier does a scan around the village to confirm or deny the presence of any potentially hostile individuals.

With the word passed through radio traffic, Maschmeier informs the pilots that the ground crew will be exiting the village. Pilots flying the King Air 300 manage the airspace they're currently working in while maintaining situational awareness of the other aircraft in the stack.

"While the ASO is working to get sensor coverage to the supported unit, the pilots are ensuring safe operation and maintaining awareness of the often-times very crowded and challenging airspace," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Clint Brown, a King Air Pilot and resident of Anchorage, Alaska, Detachment 54, Alaska Army National Guard.

Maschmeier continues his scan of the village and the proposed exit route back to the nearby Forward Operating Base. When he sees activity that may meet set criteria for reporting, Maschmeier relays that information back to the ground through many different communications methods. The flow of information is seamless and helps to minimize the risk to our deployed service members.

"Having come from the medevac community, I witnessed up-close the devastating impact IEDs can have on our Soldiers," Brennan said. "Being a part of Task Force ODIN allows us to have a meaningful and proactive impact on the prevention of these events from happening in the first place. Serving in this role and saving lives is extremely rewarding for all of us."

The mission draws to a close with insurgents captured, weapons confiscated, and the ground unit safely back at the forward operating base. Maschmeier reports to higher headquarters the end of a successful mission.

Just as they turn to head back to Bagram Airfield, Maschmeier hears another TF ODIN manned aircraft reporting wheels-up to support a different operation in a nearby province.

Just another day in the constant Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance coverage provided by the deployed Army National Guardsmen of Company B, 306th Aerial Exploitation Battalion, TF ODIN- A and the Soldiers of Detachment 54 Alaska Army National Guard.

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Photo Cutlines:

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BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan – Staff Sgt. Eric Maschmeier, Aerial Sensor Operator, Company B, 306th Aerial Exploitation Battalion, Task Force Observe, Detect, Identify, and Neutralize - Afghanistan (TF ODIN- A), and resident of Anchorage, Alaska, checks the equipment onboard the King Air 300 prior to flight on March 8. The enlisted Soldiers of Company B operate and maintain the collection equipment onboard the aircraft throughout their 12 month deployment, accruing hundreds of flight hours over the skies of Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jack Carlson III, TF ODIN-A, PAO)

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BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan – Chief Warrant Officer 2 Clint Brown, King Air 300 pilot, Company B, 306th Aerial Exploitation Battalion, Task Force Observe, Detect, Identify, and Neutralize - Afghanistan (TF ODIN- A), and resident of Anchorage, Alaska, poses March 9 with the one of the aircraft he pilots on a daily basis. Pilots of the Company are tasked with the safety of the aircraft and crew while piloting in very crowded airspace and over treacherous terrain. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jack Carlson III, TF ODIN-A, PAO)

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BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan – A King Air 300 from Company B, 306th Aerial Exploitation Battalion, Task Force Observe, Detect, Identify, and Neutralize - Afghanistan (TF ODIN- A), sits on the Delta East Ramp during sunset on Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. The Company B Soldiers who pilot and operate the aircraft represent 11 Army National Guard state flight detachments. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jack Carlson III, TF ODIN-A, PAO)

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